

The Chapel of La Misericordia in the Quarter of Flores, Buenos Aires La Capilla de La Misericordia en el Barrio de Flores, Buenos Aires

Ofelia MANZI
Universidad de Buenos Aires
ofeliamanzi@hotmail.com

Patricia GRAU-DIECKMANN
Inst. Superior del Profesorado Dr. Joaquín V. González, Buenos Aires
pgraud@gmail.com

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Abstract: One of the most interesting areas of research of the Gothic Revival in Argentina is the study of chapels built for the use of religious schools' communities. Among these, the Chapel of La Misericordia helped to determine the scope and characteristics of the neo-Gothic style in Argentina. The windows are a recreation of the Gothic openings. Their decorative motifs derive from Winchester style manuscripts, while the figures clearly show Pre-Raphaelite reminiscences. This apparent aesthetic paradox conveys a message unchanged for centuries in a traditional medium such as a neo-Gothic cover, although adapted to the sentimental sensitivity for a girls' school chapel. In this article we will focus on the iconographic analyses of the astounding stained-glass windows crafted in the 1930s by the Tiroler Glasmalerei Anstalt of Innsbruck.

Key Words: Buenos Aires, neo-Gothic, iconography, stained-glass windows, Christian message, Catholic young girls.

Resumen: Una de las áreas más interesantes dentro de la investigación del *Revival* Gótico en la Argentina es la que estudia las capillas construidas para uso de los alumnos de las escuelas católicas. En este sentido, la capilla de la Misericordia fue fundamental a la hora de determinar el alcance y las características del estilo Neogótico en Buenos Aires. Los vitrales son una recreación de las aperturas góticas. Sus motivos decorativos provienen de los manuscritos iluminados con el estilo llamado "Winchester", mientras que los personajes muestran claras reminiscencias prerrafaelitas. Esta aparentemente paradójica estética es ideal para la transmisión de un mensaje que tradicionalmente se encontraba inserto en un medio puramente goticista, inalterable durante siglos y que, con el agregado de la estética prerrafaelista, muy al gusto femenino, logró adaptarse a la sensibilidad que debía reinar en la capilla de una escuela para niñas y señoritas. El estudio de la iglesia se centrará básicamente en el análisis de los espléndidos vitrales fabricados en los años '30 del siglo XX por la Tiroler Glasmalerei Anstalt de Innsbruck.

Palabras clave: Buenos Aires, neo-gótico, iconografía, vitrales, mensaje cristiano, muchachas católicas.

Contents: 1. Antecedents. 2. Architecture. 3. Stained-Glass Windows. 3.1. The Education of Young Mary. 3.2. Presentation of the Blessed Mary in the Temple. 3.3. The Annunciation. 3.4. The Betrothal of the Virgin. 3.5. The Nativity of Jesus. 3.6. Presentation in the Temple. 3.7. Flight into Egypt. 3.8. Jesus among the Doctors. 3.9. Jesus at the Carpenter's Workshop. 3.10. The Wedding at Cana. 3.11. Mary meets her Son on the cross. 3.12. Crucifixion. 3.13. Pentecost. 3.14. Virgin Mary receives the Holy Communion. 3.15. The Death of the Virgin. 3.16. Angels Musicians. 3.17. Mary Crowned by her Son. 3.18. The Immaculate Virgin. 4. Liturgical furniture. 5. Conclusion.

1. Antecedents

Unlike many Latin American cities graced with colonial buildings, the architecture of Buenos Aires has taken its inspiration from Europe, mainly from France. The city is nicknamed “The Little Paris” on account of hundreds of *petits hôtels* that give it a Parisian appearance.

The rare neo-Gothic edifices were at first churches built by Anglo-Saxon Protestants who arrived in Argentina over the first decades of the nineteenth century. Neo-Gothic buildings merged into the urban landscape and were identified with ethnic groups of immigrants —German and British— that held services at those churches. By the end of this century, the neo-Gothic tendency also appeared among Catholic churches. While Protestant churches had followed Anglo-Saxon and German parish models, the neo-Gothic Catholic churches were built following French Gothic models and, to a lesser degree, the Italian Gothic. The Gothic revival became widespread during the early twentieth century, particularly in parish churches and Catholic school chapels.

One of the most interesting areas of research on Argentina’s Gothic Revival is the study of chapels built for the sole use of religious schools’ communities. These understudied churches are located in several quarters of Buenos Aires, within premises of private Catholic schools. Most of them have only been the subject of reviews for internal use, published in brochures or Anniversary Books. A deeper study of these chapels is invaluable to better understand the architectural trends that define the peculiar profile of Buenos Aires, modified by the emergence of an unfamiliar style that referred to the Middle Ages but adapted to contemporary uses and necessities, and organized in accordance with the various traits of their religious communities.¹

The Chapel of La Misericordia (Our Lady of Mercy) helped determine the scope and characteristics of the Argentine neo-Gothic style in “The Gothic Revival in Argentina”, a research project by the University of Buenos Aires. The Chapel is located in the very *porteño* quarter of Flores, about 4.5 miles (7 km) west from downtown Buenos Aires. Originally, in the same plot there was an old Oratory dedicated to the Annunciation to Virgin Mary,² erected in 1871 next to a small school ruled by the Daughters of our Lady of Mercy, an Italian religious Order founded by Mother Josefa Roselló. This original building was demolished in 1936 and a new chapel took its place, instituted on November 10, 1937 with the benediction of Dr. Santiago Copello, then Archbishop Cardinal of Buenos Aires. The sponsors were the newly-elected President of Argentina Dr. Roberto M. Ortiz and his wife.³ The neo-Gothic building was designed by architect Mario Cook and built by León Vally and Co.

¹ For further reading, see Francisco CORTI, Patricia GRAU-DIECKMANN and Ofelia MANZI, *Neogótico. Iglesias católicas*, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte “Julio E. Payró”, 2012.

² The wooden statue of Virgin Mary and Saint Gabriel that used to be at the Main Altar was removed after the remodeling of the building and placed in a new altar at right, with an inscription in marble that reads “*Verbum caro factum est*” (The Word became flesh”).

³ The newspaper *La Prensa*, November 11th, 1937, informs about the event: “Se realizó ayer

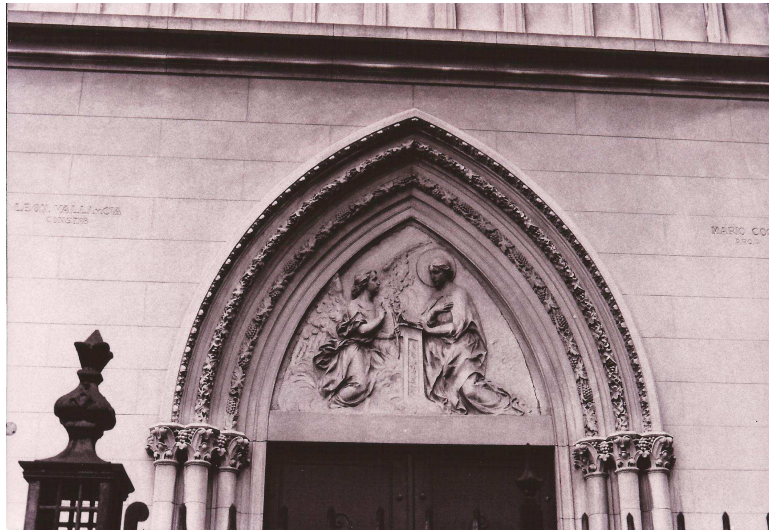


Image 1: Façade with the names of the architect Cook and the builder Vally.
Image courtesy of the authors.⁴



Image 2: External view of the *Misericordia Chapel*, 1937.

2. Architecture

The building is visually dominated by one single tower crowning the left wing. The exterior is unpretentious and presents a simple and straight outline that, except for the visible pointed arches in the openings and the typical Gothic-like rosette (a

por la tarde la bendición e inauguración de la nueva Capilla de la Anunciación. (...) Crecida concurrencia entre los que se hallaban sacerdotes de diversas Parroquias, autoridades de la Congregación de Religiosas que dirigen el mencionado establecimiento y Superiores de otros Colegios que también se hallan a cargo de las Hermanas de la Misericordia, invitados especiales y fieles en general. Participaron del Acto el purpurado Cardenal Santiago Luis Copello que entró acompañado de los rectores de las Parroquias de San José de Flores, Pbro. Luis Labbenne, y de Santa Clara Pbro. Juan Stillo, del Capellán del Colegio Pbro. Pedro Bessero y otros sacerdotes (...). Luego de la Ceremonia, el Cardenal Primado impartió la bendición con el Santísimo (...). Mañana a las ocho habrá una Jornada Eucarística con Misa celebrada por el Pbro. Juan José O'Toole...".

⁴ The authors took all images.

symbol of divine perfection), does not clearly suggest the presence of the architectural French neo-Gothic elements in its interior. Both internal and external walls have been geometrically incised to imitate the texture of ashlar, a resource widely used in Argentina to resemble more accurately the Gothic constructive devices.⁵

The interior of the church has one central nave and two side aisles, the former being twice the width of the latter, and separated from the aisles by wide arcades. Over the side aisles there is a very luminous upper gallery. The nave is divided in sections, defined by cross ribs of quadripartite vaults converging to fascicular pillars composed of shafts that join to the ribs of the nave, transverse and cross arches, and communicate both levels through said pillars.

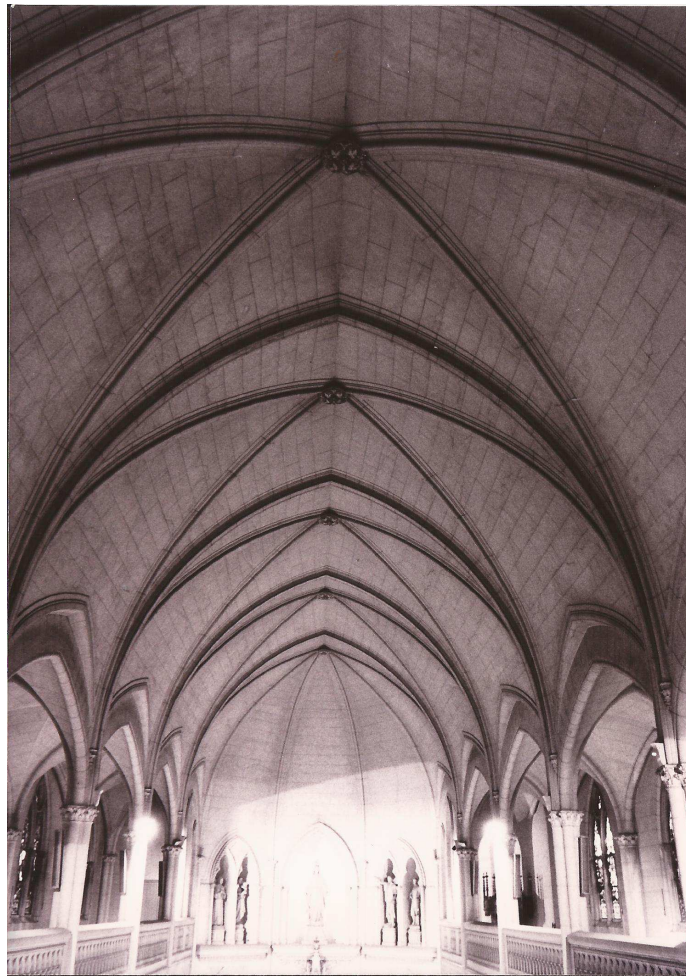


Image 3: View of the cross ribbed quadripartite vaults.

The apse is polygonal and, as the rest of the building, follows the peculiar articulation of the wall with roots in the French Gothic style. The ensemble of all neo-Gothic factors is but a proof of the search for inspiration in the models of the Gothic *revival* that has become a trademark of numerous such instances in Argentina.

⁵ Ofelia MANZI, Patricia GRAU-DIECKMANN, “Gothic Revival en Argentina: The Church of San Ildefonso”, *Visual Resources*, New Hampshire, London, March 2004, vol. XX, N^o 1, p. 51.



Image 4: View of the apse.

3. Stained-Glass Windows

The building's most remarkable feature is the collection of stained-glass windows of outstanding quality that cover the walls' openings, placed after 1937 and financed by the students' families. Their complex iconographic program is a sample of how texts can be adapted to suitably communicate religious messages through images. Thus, although produced relatively recently, we find a setting akin to that of the Middle Ages, with attending stories told by colorful figures, their condition of agents of communication areas bolstered by luminous properties that confer a special quality to a space conceived as a materialization of the divine.



Image 5: Central rosette in the façade.

The rosette in the façade complements eighteen stained glass windows. They were crafted by the *Tiroler Glasmalerei und Mosaik-Ansatt (TGA) Company* from Innsbruck,⁶ a city that at the time of manufacture was under German rule. Four of the stained glass windows carry the legend “Tyrol Facility / Innsbruck / Germany.” The bright colors used in the fabrication of the windows, with a marked predominance of blue, as well as the great plasticity of figure contour—while medieval, clearly of Pre-Raphaelite inspiration—convey to the ensemble a truly outstanding quality.

The iconography focuses on those scenes in the life of Christ where Mary plays an important role (for instance, in the scenes of Jesus arguing with the Doctors or The Wedding at Cana). The sustaining texts are, basically, the canonical gospels, except for those exclusively related to the life of Mary and the domestic episode where Jesus helps Joseph at the carpentry.⁷ It is notorious that women (Virgin Mary

⁶ This company, founded in 1861, takes up after the Austrian style of medieval stained glass. To meet the growing demand for stained glass for the Americas, two additional Munich studios (Franz Mayer and F. X. Zetler) joined the TGA and created, in 1884, a special style named “American”. Undoubtedly, each set of windows were carefully planned and individually designed for each buyer. As a consequence, the name of the company is always written in a glass in the language of the country of destination. Furthermore, the Spanish word “tírolés” (Tyrolean) is written with the accent symbol over the “e”, being that such a sign does not exist in the German language.

⁷ The Book of James, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, The Account of St. John the Theologian, the Book of John of Thessaloniki and *De transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis auctore Pseudo-Josepho ab Arimathea*, among others.

and St. Anne) have a leading role in all scenes, a relevant message to be pragmatically understood by the young ladies attending the church's services.



Image 6: Manufacturing Company of the stained-glass windows.

The scenes follow the same order, both on the first and the second floor, and each row should be read from the left of the altar towards the façade, that is, from South to North. There are seven stained glass windows in the east wall of the first floor, and two more at both sides of the entrance; the east wall is blind. In the upper gallery, seven stained-glass windows correspond to the lower ones, and in the east wall there are only two scenes that represent the Virgin Mary in her glory. The windows are topped by elements that resemble gables with crockets, and are profusely decorated with acanthus leaves. These are elaborated versions, inspired in Roman manuscripts of the School of Winchester, very popular during the twelfth century in Germany and Austria. The distinctive style can be found in the Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold (971-984, London, British Museum, Add. Ms. 49598) or at the top of the frame of the Letter from King Edgar for the New Minister of Winchester (966-975, London, British Library, Cotton Ms. Vespasian A. VIII, fol. 2 v.).⁸ These specimens display a remarkable richness of foliage borders, which is also characteristic of this church's stained glasses.

⁸ For images, see Louis GRODECKI, F. MÜTHERICH, J. TARALON, F. WORMALD, (1985), *Le siècle de l'An Mil, 950-1050*, Paris, Gallimard, L'univers des formes, pp. 227/ss.



Image 7: Acanthus leaves

Characters have their own distinctive features throughout the episodes and basically wear the same colors—St. Joseph wears a purple robe and mantle, except for the carpenter’s yellow-ocher apron in the scene; as a boy, Jesus wears a light-colored robe with pink-orange glitter; the Jewish priests, red robes with a *miznefet* or bonnet of the same color. As for Mary, in the first scene she is depicted with a blue robe, but from the Presentation at the Temple on to the rest of the scenes, she wears a white robe and a blue brocade mantle. The technique used to achieve a sense of translucent fabric to enhance the pleats consists of applying paint and washing it, once dried, with acid, hence obtaining subtle and glassy unique colors. Furthermore, the appearance and design of the haloes is maintained throughout the scenes, the only variation being the different sizes of the concavities in the ornamental patterns.

Outstandingly, all windows have been preserved in excellent conditions. From the outside screens that keep birds away and deter occasional impacts protect them. Nevertheless, a missing piece of red glass can be observed in Jesus’ mantle at the Wedding of Cana, and under the Virgin’s chin and the *perizoneum* at the Crucifixion.

3.1. *The Education of Young Mary*

In the right wing there is a single-fold stained glass depicting Mary as a little girl being taught how to read by her mother Anne, who holds a phylactery that reads “*egredietur virga*”(virga translates “stem”). It is the prophecy of Isaiah 11.1 “*a shoot shall grow from the stock of Jesse*”,⁹ meaning that one descendant of Jesse, father of King David, would be the Messiah. The palm tree in the background reinforces symbolism. The two entwined trunks leaning on a pilaster at the house’s corner refer to its late medieval iconography,¹⁰ a substitute for Jesse’s full representation when space was lacking.

⁹ Jesse is the Hebrew name given in the Septuagint to Isai.

¹⁰ Louis RÉAU, (1996), *Iconografía del Arte Cristiano*, I, vol. 2: *Iconografía de la Biblia – Nuevo Testamento*, Barcelona, Serbal, p. 134.



Image 8: St. Anne and young St. Mary.

It is noteworthy to observe the adherence to the gesticulation rules of preachers. Documents describe a language of signs created by the Benedictines in the *Tractatulus solemnus de arte ed vero modo predicandi*.¹¹ Anne points at the phylactery and raises the left hand, her palm halfway towards her daughter and halfway towards the observer, meaning that she is speaking of sacred matters. Mary crosses her arms over her chest, a gesture that indicates she receives the tutelage with gentleness and modesty. This formal expression is a testimony of a deeply rooted tradition in Western art, especially from the Renaissance on.

¹¹ Michael BAXANDALL, (2000), *Pintura y vida cotidiana en el Renacimiento*, Barcelona, Gili, p. 193.

Behind Mary, a bouquet of lilies—some flowered, some blooming—symbolize Mary's purity. This episode is not described in the canonical texts. The written sources for the scenes of Virgin Mary's life are the apocryphal *Book of James* and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, their nucleus dating back as early as the second century, when oral stories were quite close to the actual facts and fulfilled the curiosity of the members of the new religion. Therefore, it is not surprising that non-canonical texts were still in vogue during the twentieth century, or that their stories were included in scenes sanctioned by the Church.



Image 9: St. Mary climbing the stairs of the Temple.

3.2. *Presentation of the Blessed Mary in the Temple*

The thirteenth century's *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, who borrowed it from the apocryphal *Book of James*, *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* and *Armenian Infancy Gospel*, among others, has popularized this subject. When Mary turned three, her parents took her to Jerusalem's Temple to consecrate her to God. Texts indicate that, in spite of her age, she climbed the stairs

alone and did not turn her head for a last glance at her parents. She is welcomed by Zacharias, who wears the red holy garments imposed by God for the *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) in Ex. 28:4—a breastpiece and apron (*joshen* and *efod*) with a girdle (*abnet*), a tunic of checkered work (*ketonet tashbetz*), and a miter (*mitznefet*). The Priest has a long white beard split in two, a distinctive and usual design in TGA’s stained-glass windows.



Image 10: Detail of the head of St. Mary.

St. Anne notoriously plays an active role in the scene, delivering her child to the High Priest. The eloquent gestures of the personages have different meanings—obedience and pioussness (St. Mary), deliverance and acceptance (St. Anne and Zacharias respectively). The latter’s hands reflect everyday laical attitudes translated into the iconography of sacred scenes.¹²

The upper trefoil shows the heads of three small blond children. They are the Vadelli girls, whose family financed the whole stained glass window and for that reason were granted the honor to place a portrait of their offspring.

3.3. *The Annunciation*

There is an alteration in the chronological order of the story in the stained glass windows placement, as the Annunciation should come *after* the wedding of Mary and Joseph. We can presuppose that kits came from Europe to be assembled on site by workers with experience in stained glass, but with little knowledge of sacred history.

The trefoil reads “*ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI*,” meaning “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord*” (Luke 1:38). St. Gabriel addresses Mary by raising his hand in *oratio*, an indication of the sacredness of the message he is about to convey,¹³ and holds a

¹² Ibidem, pp. 93/95.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 90 and 190. Quote from *Espejo del mundo*, c. 1527, quoted in W.S. HOWELL, (1956), *Logic and Rhetoric in England 1500-1700*, Princeton, pp 89-90.

spike with lilies, a symbol of Mary's virginity. The gesture, of Roman origin, is described by Quintilian in his *Institutes of Oratory*¹⁴ and was transformed by Christian iconology into a means to communicate the word of God. Occasionally, it became the sign for blessing and differed in theological meaning for the Eastern and Western Churches.

The Holy Ghost, represented as a white dove entirely encircled by a halo, casts upon the ecstatic maiden a golden ray representing the exact moment of the Incarnation. Saint Mary's hands are crossed over her bosom in a gesture of obedience (*humiliatio*). In his *Sermones de laudibus sanctorum*, Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce—a preacher of the late fifteenth century—describes this receptive attitude as one of the five successive body postures of the spiritual and psychological condition of Mary when Gabriel makes his announcement. The different attitudes of the Virgin during the Annunciation are *conturbatio* (disquiet), *cogitatio* (reflection), *interrogatio* (inquiry), *humiliatio* (humble acceptance) and *meritatio* (intimate joy).¹⁵

3.4. The Betrothal of the Virgin

The trefoil reads: “*CONSTITUIT EUM DOMINUM DOMUS SUAE*, meaning “*He made him lord of his house*” (Psalm 105:21). An omitted versicle completes the sentence: “*and prince of all his possessions.*” Both phrases belong to the Litanies of Saint Joseph, a very adequate quotation for the wedding scene to be glanced at by young ladies attending mass in the 1930's.

Joseph places the ring on Mary's middle finger, and holds a bundle of lilies in his hand—a reference to the bloomed rod that miraculously favored him as husband of the Virgin—, but it is also a distinct allusion to the triple virginity of Mary (*Maria fuit Virgo post connubium, Virgo post conceptum, Virgo post partum*), a dogma since the Lateran Council of 649. The story, told in the apocryphal gospels *Book of James* and *Protoevangelium*, was a clear copy of Aaron's appointment as a High Priest (Numbers 17:23). Joseph is shown as a handsome young man, a contrast to the once-customary white-bearded old man. After the Counter-Reformation, the emphasis placed on Mary's absolute virginity made it unnecessary to depict Joseph as an aged man incapable of procreating.¹⁶ His role was passive and insignificant until Renaissance preachers made him a popular persona and, finally, Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) decreed that March 19 was to be the feast of St. Joseph.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jean P. ANTOINE, (1993), “Mémoire, lieux et invention spatiale dans la peinture italienne des XIIIe et XIV siècles”. In *Annales*, Paris, nov/dec, pp. 1447/ss. Available in <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/27584572?uid=3737512&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21102851565791> (last visit 10/31/2013).

¹⁵ BAXANDALL, op. cit., pp. 69/79.

¹⁶ It was accepted that Joseph was over eighty and Mary barely fourteen when they married (RÉAU, op. cit., I, vol.4, p. 162).

¹⁷ Joseph became *gemma mundi, nutritor Domini*. In fact, the actual legend relates that from the rod flew a white dove, pictorially represented as a branch with white flowers. The story, told in the apocryphal books Gospel of James and Gospel of Pseudo Mathew and is clearly a copy of the appointment of Aaron, brother of Moses, as High Priest (Nm17:8: “The next day Moses



Image 11: The wedding of Mary and Joseph.

A thurifer young boy incenses during the rite. Jewish clergy was familiar with the use of incense in their ceremonies by God's mandate. The Old Testament as well as the New Testament mention its use *"Once when Zacharias's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense"* (Luke 1:8-11). *"Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand."* (Revelation 8:3-4).

In the faraway landscape behind the Virgin, there appears an intriguing and rare diminutive image of two roughly-sketched men with shepherd staves, standing in front of buildings resembling Jerusalem's architecture.

entered the tent and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds".

3.5. *The Nativity of Jesus*



Image 12: Nativity of Jesus.

This is another of the windows that bear the name of the manufacturers. The upper inscription reads "GLORIA IN EXCELSIS" taken from Luke 2:15 that begins the story of the Adoration of the Shepherds, depicted on the left side of the stained glass window. The youngest shepherd has, unusually, a Tyrolean hat. In the sky, the star points with its ray of light the place where is the Child.



Image 13: The shepherds worshipping the Child

3.6. *Presentation in the Temple*

The corresponding versicle is “TUAM Animam PERTRANSIBIT Gladius” (“A sword will pierce your soul”, Lu 2:35).

The Virgin is kneeling in a pew and watches Jesus being held in display by Simeon (haloed and clothed as a priest of the temple). According to the *Book of James* (24:4), Simeon had taken the place of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, after his death. At both sides of the scene, are the prophetess Anna and St. Joseph, respectively, holding a cage with two doves, an offering of the poor to the Temple.



Image 14: Jesus is presented in the Temple.

3.7. *Flight into Egypt*



Image 15: The Flight to Egypt.

The inscription reads “EX Aegypti FILIUM VOCAVI MEUM / MATTH . 15”. The scene shows Joseph leading the donkey by the bridle. He wears, once more, the violet tunic and the golden mantle he used at the scene of the wedding though now they fit his legs like pants. He wears red boots and a red hat, typical of the pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. On his left shoulder he carries an ax from which hangs a bundle. A pictorial tradition instituted during the twelfth century has St. Joseph turn his head to watch Mary and the Child following him in a donkey. The Virgin holds Jesus very tightly and their faces touch, in a warm gesture of tenderness. In the representation of the headdress of Mary, both in the Nativity and here, the designer abandons the aesthetics of the Old Testament and displays Pre-Raphaelite parameters.

In the path, curiously, a small bright red snake flees before the passage of Mary.¹⁸

¹⁸ For Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics and images, see HAWKSLEY, Lucinda, *Essential Pre-Raphaelites*, Bath, Parragon, 1999.

3.8. *Jesus among the Doctors*



Image 16: Jesus among the Doctors.

This is one of the two scenes that flank the main door and both depict Jesus as a grown-up boy in two different perspectives—full of wisdom and as an obedient son. The trefoil reads “*ERAT SEDENS INTER MAGISTROS / LUC 2.46*” (“*sitting among the doctors, Luke 2:46*”) and is one of two related scenes—when Jesus is lost in Jerusalem (one of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin) and when he is found by his parents among the doctors (one of the Seven Joys). It is the last episode of the infancy of Jesus, before he withdraws from public ministry for several years. According to traditional iconography, he is standing barefoot on a wooden platform, while the doctors stare at him in amazement. They hold the codex Jesus had used as a symbol of the new messianic era, and their roll (they had kept the tradition of writing sacred texts in rolls) lies on the floor, discarded, by Jesus’ feet.¹⁹

¹⁹ RÉAU, op. cit., I, vol.2, p. 305 ss.

Jesus had a first manifestation as a teacher and preached for the first time. The incident occurred when Jesus was twelve, a meaningful age in Jewish tradition — Moses parted from his family at twelve, Daniel revealed himself at this age, and Salomon became king of the United Kingdom of Israel and Juda. Furthermore, the number twelve carries a deep-rooted symbology, and is the result of multiplying three (the Trinity, hence, the divine sphere) by four (the world: the four rivers of Paradise, the four Evangelists, the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Four Elements, the four Cardinal Points). The result refers to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the twelve Prophets, the twelve Sibyls, the twelve stars crowning the Woman of John's Apocalypse, the twelve Signs of the Zodiac.

By the time TGA manufactured these stained glass windows, the symbolism of the scene probably held a long-forgotten connotation. In spite of the forlorn meaning, it is noteworthy that the iconographic elements were kept intact for so long.

3.9. *Jesus at the Carpenter's Workshop*

Chronologically, this scene should have been placed before Jesus' discussion with the Jewish doctors, as the boy looks younger and his hair is shorter. Legend says that he learned his father's trade while living in Egypt and the palm tree might be an indication of their whereabouts. Mary spins thread while sitting on a sort of dais that enhances her importance as custodian of the child. The inscription reads: "*SUBDITUS ERAT ILLIS / LUC 2.51*" ("*and was subject to them,*" *Luke 2:51*). This is a versicle that has been traditionally applied to the submission of Jesus to her parents, pictorially reflected in the humble attitude of Jesus handling a tool to Joseph.

The scene would certainly be inspiring for the young pupils who had to be "subject" and obedient to their parents, as well as their teachers.

3.10. *The Wedding at Cana*

In the stained glass windows of the first floor in the left wing, the trefoils do not carry any allusive versicles. Nonetheless, the scenes can be easily recognized, as they depict well-known iconographical elements. Mary's intercession in favor of the newly married is but one of the many episodes that converge on the last stained glass window that depicts the glorification of St. Mary as mother of the Savior, shown in glorious celestial triumph. This is the first public miracle of Jesus (John 2:1-11) and it is considered one of the four Epiphanies,²⁰ all of them celebrated by early Christians on January 6. Jesus and his mother attend a wedding in the town of Cana and when the hosts run out of wine, Jesus miraculously turns the water in the vessels into an excellent wine.

In olden times, in the Aegean Islands and in Anatolia, Turkey, a festival in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god who turned water into wine, used to be celebrated on January 6.²¹ Probably the substitution of a Christian festivity for the pagan one

²⁰ From the Greek *epiphaneia*, manifestation. It the manifestation of Christ as God, being the other three The Adoration of the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Kings and The Baptism of Christ.

²¹ Rudolf BULTMANN, (1962), *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, p. 83, quoted in Uta RANKE-

explains the peculiarity of Christ's first miracle. Traditionally, two consecutive instances are represented in the same scene—Jesus blessing the vessels, and the butler approving the wine's quality. Pictorially, the liquid poured by a servant, half white and half red, represents the transformation of water into wine.

The bride and the groom wear gold crowns of flowers and laurel, respectively. In 866, Pope Nicholas I described the rites of marriage in the Latin Church as including the "coronation on leaving the church" (*Post haec autem de Ecclesia egressi coronas in capitibus gestant*).²² The meaning was that couples were sovereigns of their own homes. Nowadays, the coronation is still part of the Greek rite, while the Western Church has abandoned it.

3.11. *Mary meets her Son on the cross*

In one side of this stained glass window outstands the delicate painting work on the suffering face of Christ, showing a high drawing quality that simply uses a few delicate yellow-ocher hues. In the opposite side, Mary, fingers gracefully intertwined, is close to a soldier wearing an arbitrary recreation of a Roman uniform and who is dragging Christ with a rope.

3.12. *Crucifixion*

This is another of the signed stained glass windows. Two lines are written with ocher letters over a yellow background: "ESTABL. TYROLEAN / INNSBRUCK, GERMANY".

Under a sky with very dark clouds and a slight glow indicating the proximity of the sunset, St. John Evangelist holds the Virgin in her grief at her dead Son. In the right panel, Christ crucified occupies almost all available space, in marked contrast with the small size of the other figures, especially the Roman soldier who, arm raised, occupies about a quarter of the height of the Crucified. This minute Roman soldier (about one-fourth the size of Christ) with a lance, submits to John's words "*But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water immediately came out.*" (Jn. 19: 33-34). Matthew mentions "*When the centurion and those guarding Jesus with him saw the earthquake and the other things that were taking place, they were terrified and said, 'This man certainly was the Son of God!'*" (Mt.25:54). The soldier and the centurion were merged by the collective imagination into one, the poor-sighted centurion St. Longinus, whose name comes from the Greek *longké*, lance, and who was cured of his eye affection by a drop of blood from Jesus. He became a Christian saint and his presumed conserved lance, has been object of many mystical legends.

HEINEMANN, (1995), *Putting away childish things*, San Francisco, Harper, Chapter 6. Furthermore, RÉAU, op. cit., vol.2, p. 378 refers that the transformation of water into wine took place annually in the island of Andros.

²² Louis DUCHESNE, (1949), *Christian Worship. Its origin and evolution. A study of the Latin liturgy up to the time of Charlemagne*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, pp. 429/433.

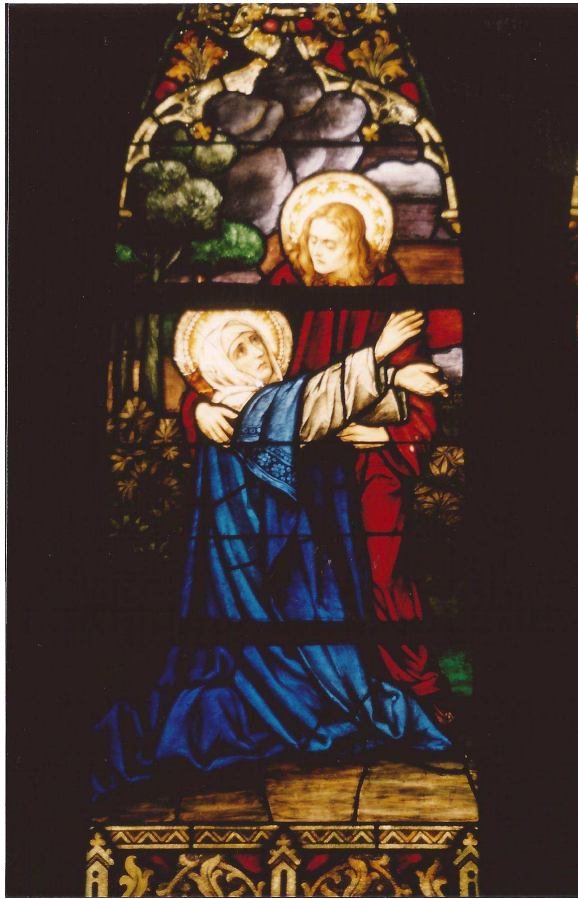


Image 17: John the Evangelist comforts St. Mary.

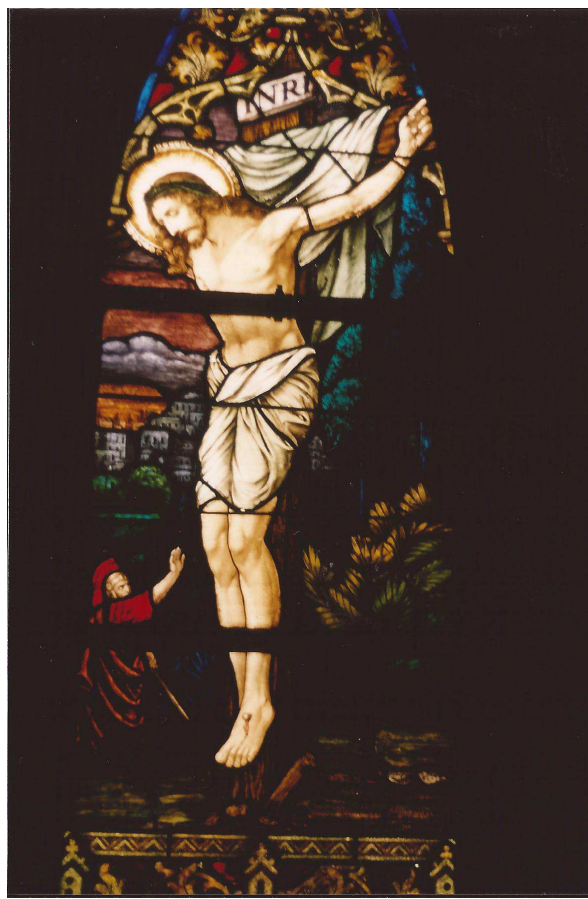


Image 18: Christ crucified

3.13. Pentecost

The written source is Acts 2:1-4 “*Now when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (...) and tongues spreading out like a fire appeared to them and came to rest on each one of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them*”. Virgin Mary and the eleven apostles are shown with small flames on their heads. The Holy Spirit, represented as a white dove, is above Mary’s head and has a remarkable small red halo, and irradiates beams of light from all its body. Virgin Mary is in the center of the scene and some of the apostles can be identified, Peter with his keys, James the Great because of his close likeness to Jesus’ features (they were cousins and James is represented resembling Him, but older), John by his blond long hair and his youth.

It is noteworthy that most personages show their beards with the end split in two, a characteristic of the Tiroler Glasmalerei und Mosaik-Ansalt.



Image 19: The Virgin and the Apostles at Pentecost.

3.14. *Virgin Mary receives the Holy Communion*

Mary receives the Holy Communion from the hands of St. John the Evangelist. This iconographical subject is not very frequent and did not appeal to the artists. Representations of the Virgin Mary receiving the Holy Communion appear first in early sixteenth century in France and Germany as a result of Martin Luther's negative attitude towards the Sacraments. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) sanctioned and recommended its iconography as propaganda *adversus Lutheranos*.

3.15. *The Death of the Virgin*

The Passing of Mary is also variously known as the Departure, Koimesis, The Falling Asleep of the Holy Mother of God, Dormition, and Assumption. Over seventy apocryphal manuscripts written between the fourth and sixth centuries describe the last days of Mary and her passing away. The merging of several documents from different dates and origins produced the popular *Transit of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Its original nucleus was *The Account of St. John the Theologian of the Falling Asleep of the Holy Mother of God*, written shortly before the Byzantine emperor Maurice (582-602) issued a decree declaring August 15 to be the Virgin Mary's Assumption Day.²³

According to legend, Jesus himself took Mary to Paradise both in soul and body. Before her Dormition, all the apostles—including those who were already dead—were carried to her deathbed. The implicit message was closely related to the primitive Christian iconography depicted on sarcophagi and catacomb walls to

²³ Antonio PIÑERO, (1993), *Fuentes del Cristianismo – Tradiciones primitivas sobre Jesús*, El Almendro, Córdoba, Universidad Complutense, Madrid, pp. 448/ss, and *Los Evangelios Apócrifos*, (2002), Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos. Forewords by Aurelio de SANTOS OTERO.

remind the pious that eternal salvation was attainable. The Virgin's death is a lesson to be followed, expressed by the ideal of the late Middle Ages *Ars Moriendi* or "The Art of Dying Well," that condensed the early Christian formula of the *Ecclesia*, "What you have done for the faithful, O Lord, do as well for me".²⁴

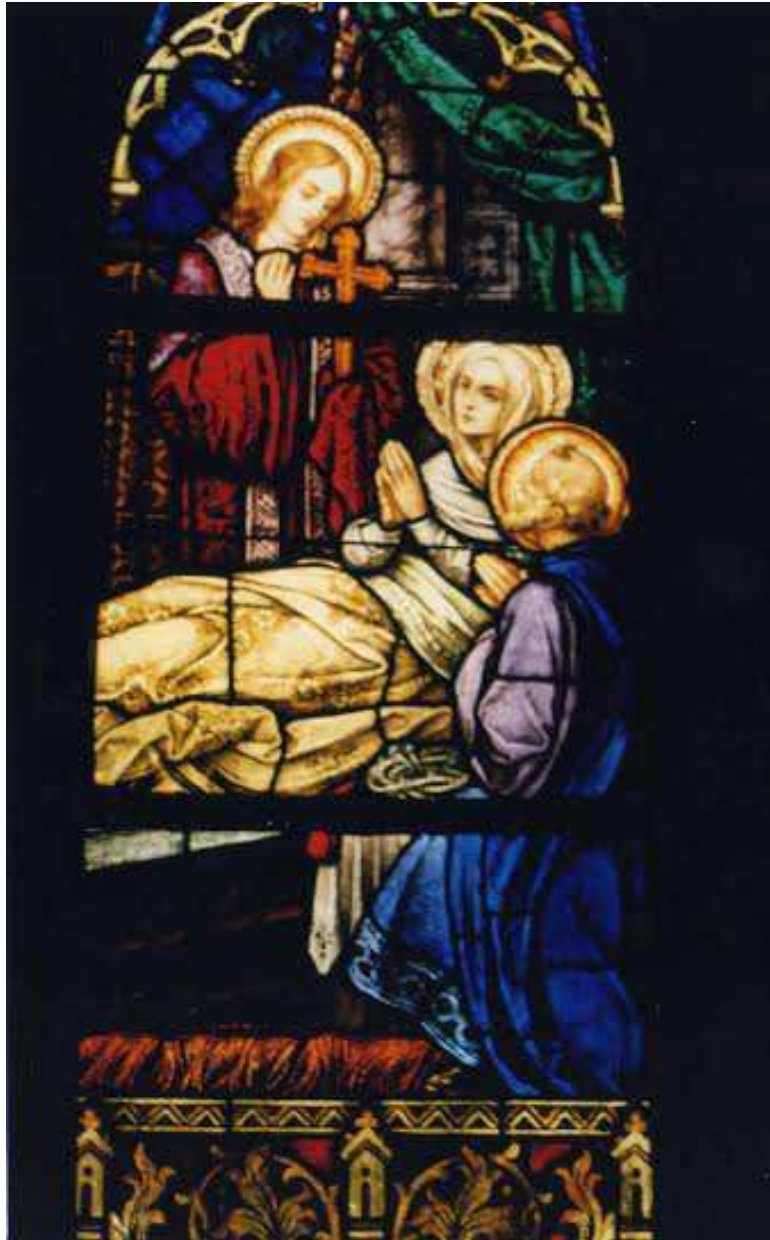


Image 20: The Dormition of the Virgin.

By her deathbed, four apostles pray to help her in her transit. The service is celebrated by John the Divine wearing priest garments and holding a cross. Close to Mary are the crown of thorns and three nails of Jesus' Passion. She is sitting on her bed, according to the Western iconography on the subject.

²⁴ Ofelia MANZI, (1996), "La imagen cristiana, algunos problemas estilísticos e iconográficos en el arte tardoantiguo", *El hilo de Ariadna. Del tardoantiguo al tardomedioevo*, Rosario, Homo sapiens. For further reading about the subject, see the *Ordo Commendationis Animae* in Gérald GASSIOT-TALABOT, (1968), *Pintura romana y paleocristiana*, Madrid, Aguilar, p. 117.

3.16. *Musician Angels*

Two wingless angels play zither and violin respectively. The decoration at the bottom of the stained glass is totally different from the previous ones, as this one is absolutely geometrical. This glass seems to have been fabricated by a different company. The name of the famous Argentine stained glass manufacturer Estruch has been mentioned by some of the older nuns, but there is no proven evidence of his intervention, whatsoever.

3.17. *Mary Crowned by her Son*



Image 21: Virgin Mary crowned by Jesus Christ.

There are only two stained glass windows in the western wall of the second floor, and both are close to the apse. Adjacent to the church and sharing part of the wall is the school building. Both communicate by a small and rather hidden door.

The episode of the coronation of the Virgin is hinted at in *The Account of St. John the Theologian of the Falling Asleep of the Holy Mother of God*. Voragine

fully developed the subject by having Christ sing to his mother “*Come, my chosen one, and I will set you upon my throne (...) thou shalt be crowned*”.²⁵

On the left panel, Mary, perennially young—almost a girl—is crowned by her son while the Holy Spirit approaches, represented as a dove with a fine red halo. On the right panel God the Father gives his blessing, two small angels at his feet. The whole scene is set against a cosmic backdrop with characters surrounded by clouds, amidst numerous minute golden stars.

3.18. *The Immaculate Virgin*



Image 22: The Immaculate Virgin.

The Virgin Mary was miraculously conceived without sin when her sterile parents Anna and Joachim embraced at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem. She was chosen previous to her birth and was conceived in eternity, even before Eve (Prov.

²⁵ Jacobus de VORAGINE, (1995), *The Golden Legend*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, vol. 2, pp. 80-81.

8:22). The story is told in several apocryphal gospels —*The Gospel of James*, *The Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*, *The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* and *The Armenian Infancy Gospel*— and popular devotion celebrated the feast long before Pious IX declared the Immaculate Conception dogma in 1854. However, previous popes had already shown their intention for legitimating it. Mary's purity was acclaimed by the Council of Trent (1545/1563), when it was also declared that Mary ascended to Heaven in soul and body.

The Virgin, represented as the Immaculate Conception, wears a white gown and a blue mantle and appears floating amidst clouds and angels while glancing down upon the earth. This iconography was contaminated by the apocalyptic woman of Revelation 12:1 and Mary was sometimes surrounded by Mariological attributes taken from the Litany of Loreto. There was a close but confusing connection between the images of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption and, by the end of the sixteenth century, the Glorification of the Virgin had incorporated the iconography of the apocalyptic woman, and both of the above mentioned advocations of Mary—garments, stars, clouds, *putti* and her uplifted glance.

This last window represents the summit of the cycle of the Virgin of Merici ("La Misericordiosa"), patroness of the church. Mary is represented in her full glory, crowned by the twelve stars of the apocalyptic woman that remind us of the twelve apostles gathered around her deathbed. She radiates rays from her body and wears a white robe and a blue mantle. Her arms are crossed over her bosom and at her feet there are two *putti* holding flowers and the palm branch delivered by St. Gabriel at the announcement of her quietus: "*I have brought you a palm branch from paradise, and you are to have it carried before your bier. Three days from now you will be assumed from the body, because your Son is waiting for you.*"²⁶ On the third day after her Dormition, the Lord came with a multitude of angels to carry her in soul and body to Heaven. Voragine describes her as being glorified by her son: "*Arise, my dear one, my dove, tabernacle of glory (...). Thereupon Mary's soul entered her body, and she came forth glorious from the monument and was assumed into the heavenly bridal chamber, a great multitude of angels keeping her company.*"²⁷

On the left panel, two angels pay homage to our Lady—one staring fixedly at her and holding a staff of white lilies. The other plays the harp and, interestingly, directs his glance at the beholder, thus engaging the observer into an ongoing worship of Mary in her glory.

4. Liturgical furniture

In 1943 the relics of the founder of the Order and other holy martyrs are placed in the chapel.²⁸ Nowadays, in the left wall next to the main altarpiece, next to the

²⁶ VORAGINE, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 78

²⁷ Ibidem, vol. 2, pp. 81/83.

²⁸ The corresponding document reads "En Buenos Aires, el día trece de agosto del año del Señor de mil novecientos cuarenta y tres, el Altar Mayor de la Capilla de la Anunciación (Directorio

entrance to the school, there is a plaque with the inscription “Beata Ma. Ludovica 1880-1962”.

The Walcker organ (with over 180 pipes, double keyboard and pedalboard) was brought from Germany and installed in 1948. Johan Eberhard Walcker created the company in 1780 in Cannstatt, near Stuttgart. It has provided organs of excellence to countless churches, such as St. Peter's Church in St. Petersburg, Russia, and the Cathedral of St. Stephan in Vienna, Austria. The community of La Misericordia is very proud of possessing one of such treasured organs.



Image 23: The Walcker organ

2118) [es] dedicado a la Santísima Virgen de la Misericordia incluyendo el mismo las Reliquias de los santos mártires Alejandro, Genaro y Severino, y la de la Beata María Josefa Rosselló. Luego de la consagración concedí a todos los fieles que visitaren el Altar Mayor en el día de hoy, un año de indulgencia y a los que visitaren el Altar el día del aniversario de la consagración concedí cien días de la misma indulgencia según la forma que acostumbra la Santa Iglesia. A perpetua Memoria de esta Acta - Antonio Rocca Obispo de Augusta y Vicario General – P. Juan José O’Toole Gilardi 2º Asistente – P. Héctor Gilardi 1er Asistente.”



Image 24: A close view of the main altar.

5. Conclusion

Because of its external profile, wall articulation and lighting, the Chapel of La Misericordia is an interesting example among the group of buildings constructed according to the guidelines of the Gothic revival. Such features are critical to emphasize harmony of dimensions and beauty of materials, all of which contribute to the undeniable artistic worth of the collection. The building itself is beautiful and proportionate, but what imparts to the temple its true sheen and preeminence is the presence of the stained glass windows, deemed by experts to be glazed gems, both for their design and gamut as well as for their pristine condition.

Although the images are but recreations of well-established iconography, one cannot deny the impact they must have had on students as original works of art teeming with colors and detail. These images were part of a down-to-earth ensemble, as is the reproduction of a medieval church, thus transforming significance into a timeless message. In most instances, a textual reminder in the form of a scroll or title crowns the stained glass window. Were they aware of the source? Probably. The young ladies of the educated Argentine middle class held long reading sessions over sacred stories, and what did not appear in canonical texts was either narrated in religious books or known through oral tradition. Unlike the population in other large Latin American cities, the inhabitants of Buenos Aires take pride in keeping close ties to their European heritage. There is no trace or vestige of aboriginal influence, all but absent in the Argentine territory, except for the northern provinces close to the Incan imprint of Colonial heyday.

The reading of a stained glass window brings about a manner of communication with plain and simple syntax—few personages, minimal but meaningful gestures, essential and outstanding iconographical information. The meaning of the scenes remains unchanged after so many years and the message that was relevant in the 1940s still applies. Whether from written or oral sources, both the messages and the iconography date back to early Christianity. A compelling model to follow, stories repeated a thousandfold and guidance on what to expect in the afterlife—they all linger on, albeit through models adapted to contemporary social taste and to our novel ability for interpreting and translating images.

The illumination of manuscripts moved on to a different media, stained glass. Yet, it survived this transformation by adapting and becoming itself a frame of a scene. Images, precepts, cultural legacy and amusing allusions from the ritualistic and deeply-religious Middle Ages thus converged onto new images, to be reinterpreted by pious girls educated to become the new Virgin Maries, models of virtue, perfect homemakers and mothers.